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music REVIEWS

intellectual newspapers but it had really *just appeared* to most American teenagers. Suddenly, it was acceptable to be quirky and dorky and dig the early Beatles and have song titles that were either awesomely abstract, like "Happenstance," or awesomely banal, like "I Feel Good (Today)." The dB's have beautiful melodies, weird sounds, backward pianos, rapid handclapping and all that, but the cornball skeletons these CD's drag out of the closet are just too much to bear . . . too smarty-pants, too clever, too damn bohemian for anyone but a college student in some dreary northeastern province to relate to.

Of course, nowadays, everything's changed. The only bohemians left are straight-up hippies like Edie Brickell and *her* Bohemians and all the art-student-damaged songwriters copping late-Beatles dilemmas (XTC being the closest example). The air and the airwaves are tight and malevolent, and there's really no place for a sinus-stuffed intellectual to sing harmonies in dorky peace like there was in 1981. And, as no one is complaining too much about the lack of great smarty-pants pop, I can't really say the change is for the worse. (Daniel Weizmann)

THE DEL FUEGOS
Smokin' in the Fields (RCA)

The Fuegos' likelihood of ever penetrating the consciousness of prole-America diminishes every month that the memory of "Born in the USA" dims. As one of a million roots-rock combos signed in the wake of the Boss' mega-crossover (intending to be the antidote to British synth foppery), the Fuegos were cleaned up from the careening and exciting bar-and-loft-party group they started life as, and repackaged as hop-swilling Boys Next Door.

After three albums for Warner Bros., each with an increasing reliance on session players and the heavy hand of Mitchell "I hate garage bands" Froom producing, the boys have found a new home at RCA, and a new hand behind the console as well.

Smoking in the Fields is the best album Del Fuegos have ever made; no longer do they bow to Asbury Park as if it were an American Mecca, but their allegiance is back in New England where it belongs. Sounding very much like the late, lamented (by me, anyway) J. Geils Band, the group pays homage to Dirtywaterville on the opener, "Move With Me, Sister," reciting a litany of B-bands including the Lyres, Real Kids and Neighborhoods. Such exercises in sentiment usually make me reach for an airline-sickness bag, but the sound is so right on this and the other tracks, so raw and alive, that I can forgive it.

And to the ears of the world: a possible hit, "Breakaway." Although Fuegos' new drummer is hardly the heavy hitter that Woody Giesman was, and most of the new songs are more tentative than the performance accorded them, if any group deserves a second listen, it's this one. If Pete Townshend is forgiven for "Hope I die before I get old," then Dan Zanes should be forgiven for "Rock is folk music for plain folks." Fair enough? (Johnny Angel)

FIFTH ANGEL
Time Will Tell (Epic)

Eeeek! Someone let Ronnie James Dio's production team get into a nasty ol' brawl with an Ozzy Osbourne impersonator — and they recorded it. Rough-'n'-tumble riders through the seamy side of heaven (well, that peculiar heaven where old rockers go to die), Fifth Angel are fifth-rate metal monsters who try to excite you by playing their guitars fast — note-order be damned! Judging from *Time Will Tell*, Fifth Angel like their songs carefully crafted into repetitious circuits of the rock & roll merry-go-round, missing by miles the brass ring. I *know* that if Fifth Angel could freeze their music, fat would come to the surface in huge globs, ripe for skimming. The fat, in this case, is their outdated warrior-religious-medieval theme (ex.: "Cathedral," "Angel of Mercy"). Here and there, they almost get it, but lose it just as quickly: the slow Spanish guitar intro to "Broken Dreams" sounds really beautiful — then it's immediately followed by a cavernous drum beat, and the whole thing gets awkward and falls apart. At least when the singer takes it slow, he loses the tinges of Oz. Excluding a few happy moments here and there, listening to the album is like reading a 1981 issue of *Circus* — and sighing about the state of rock. (Gena Nason)

DEBBIE HARRY
Def, Dumb & Blonde (Sire)

Is it "new wave" nostalgia — wanting a lost heroine/role model from my particular hot little rock & roll era (late '70s-early '80s) to rightfully regain her throne — that makes me think this might be Debbie Harry's best record in years? Even Stephen Sprouse couldn't camouflage the lack of sustained drive in Harry's last attempt at the big comeback, *Rockbird*. But evidence bodes well for Harry here: she begins by convincingly advertising her prospects as a 21st-century girl ready for romance (and not afraid to let the usually dreaded Thompson Twins produce a serviceably cheery track for her). Recalling by the end of this album everything you ever liked about Blondie (B-movie sass 'n' innocence slouching toward deliberately self-conscious glamour), Harry lays her cards on the table and adroitly recaps what became her legend most ("End of the Run"). She doesn't want to talk about the old days unless it foretells the future, but Harry admits that something as simple as a torn T-shirt used to spell danger. She's passionate about her memories yet canny enough to know better than to impersonate her past.

So excuse me if I stop worrying about critical credibility and give in to a little well-deserved gushing: Debbie's really back this time, running through her vocal personas like someone joyously rediscovering all that good stuff she forgot was hanging in the back of the closet. And after all those hard-line, tough, glossy, impenetrable Paula Ciccone yup-dance commercials, it's nice to hear Harry's street-snappy vulnerability and cool. It feels just a tad more honest. No, this is not a perfect record — not with "Get Your Way" included; it's an unfortunate follow-up to "Rapture." (Harry will never be a lap monster, even if she's replaced the man from Mars eating guitars with something about Frankenstein, for chrissakes!) But Blondie always had a certain savoir faire in style-swapping, and Harry tries 'em all on for size here, from longing pseudo-tropical pop ("Calmarie," by Brazilian-of-the-hour Nana Vasconcelos), to big-boom "Denis Denis"-style Blonde classix-pop ("Maybe for Sure"), to the bubble-gum snap of a white girl funked up over Prince ("Kiss It Better," which makes two decent Thompson Twin tracks on one album, some other kind of record), to "Brite Side," the prettiest bit of dream pop fluff Harry's sung since . . . uh . . . "In the Flesh." We'll never have to resign ourselves to the sloppy seconds of a Transvision Vamp again. This is the true femme fatale. Welcome back, hon. We missed you. (Craig Lee)

LUNCHBOX MEMORIES

HIPPIE HIPPIE SHAKE by LYNELL GEORGE

When my parents sent me off to the Children's Learning Institute over on Wilton Place and 48th, they were grooming me to *be somebody*. Looking back, the whole deal was, in 1968 schoolyard vernacular, "pretty boss." School really wasn't school, I realize now; it was bliss: we witnessed Ernie and Bert struggle through their salad days in their little apartment on Sesame Street; French hour followed Ritz crackers and Tree Top Apple Juice; and banish the thought of archaic letter grades: we were sensitively critiqued at semester's end. The only drawback was a major one. We had hot lunch provided every day — no need for rusty lunch pails or Thermoses that could shatter and injure. But what all these enlightened, progressive people failed to realize was, how could you *really* be somebody without a lunchbox? I watched longingly as lunchbox styles came and went — *Family Affair*, Campus Queen, the sporty tartan plaid number. But when I got too old for CLI, I was sent off to a new school that thankfully didn't have hot lunch. I would finally have my own pail with a statement. Though I entrusted my mother with a list of first choices (Campus Queen and the plaid), she mistakenly came back with JUNIOR MISS — which showed a glassy-eyed junior Earth Mother with large straw hat sitting center of a flowery meadow and surrounded by frolicking furry critters. What sort of statement was that supposed to make? What was I to do? What any good little Montessori school alumna would do — be creative. In my first act of willful non-conformity I brown-bagged it. Maria would have been proud.

JETHRO TULL
20 Years of Jethro Tull (Virgin video)

Author John Barth once told me that the United States is a hard nation to parody in fiction, because so many of its elements were already so self-effacing and ironic. The same is obviously true of the Isles: Monty Python couldn't have made a more ridiculous video compilation for Jethro Tull. The whole "20 Years" project reeks of market desperation, of course, but when a group that has as little to do with visuals as Jethro Tull gets its hour-plus in front of the camera the outcome is just as silly.

The most telling transition starts with live video footage of "Aqualung" from the '70s, switches to Ian Anderson recalling having avoided obsolescence during the "back-to-basics punk thing," then channels into a 1984 video called "Lap of Luxury," where Tull sounds about as natural as Kraftwerk. Other harshnesses include Brits in a pub talking about how they see every single Tull show and Anderson in front of a castle dissing the entertainment field he detests so much.

There's a lot of Jethro Tull songs I love, and I think their special take on Renaissance rock was both inevitable and pretty good. Still, a 20-minute flashback video called *Five Good Years* sans the economic history of Tull would have sufficed. (Daniel Weizmann)

STEPHAN MICUS
The Music of Stones (ECM)

What's new in rock music? Nothing is what. Watch MTV till your orbs splash into your Moosehead, listen to college radio till you spontaneously recall the Unlimited Determined Bodies of Anaximander; you will find no ideas that weren't already dead as dried dogshit 10 years ago.

Who would've imagined that ECM Records, the label that cranks out so much airy atmosphere for Northern Europeans to snore to during those long winter nights, would gift us with the next evolutionary leap in rock music? What is it? "Rock" music *played on actual rocks*. Stones, they call 'em here, but they don't mean the old-fogey Rolling variety; these stones (fine Swedish black granite and green serpentine) are completely stationary, being large works of art hewn, chiseled, slotted, polished and otherwise conceptualized by sculptor Elmar Daucher. (An attractive and informative eight-page photobooklet is included in the package.)

Said stones are not merely beautiful objects that would greatly enhance any bank foyer; Mr. Micus (West German by birth) rubs them, bows them, gently strikes them with mallets, causing them to give forth a wide range of unsettling drones and doinks. The sound flies directly to the solar plexus, and proceeds to set up a gently irritating resonance around the aura of your heart. You soon find yourself gasping for breath and pounding yourself on the chest to restore cardiac rhythm. It's a rush! To complete the concept, Micus did Cowboy Junkies one better by recording *his* album in the cathedral at Ulm, a much bigger, older and nicer church than the one they used.

Guest addendum: Richard Meltzer suggests possible future projects for Mr. Micus. 1) That he try his hand with the work of other sculptors — Rodin maybe, or Henry Moore. They have heavy reps visually; can they measure up sonically? (One also thinks of the possibly misunderstood gentleman who took a hammer to the *Pieta*. Was he a forerunner of Micus' musical approach?) 2) That Micus explore the timbral potentialities of other artistic media, such as painting. Our curiosity has been aroused as to what rare sounds might be unlocked by the deft application of a violin bow to a Holbein.

Conclusion: Good ideas, good package, good music. *The Music of Stones* is good. (Greg Burk)

EDDIE MURPHY
So Happy (CBS)

Okay, stop me if you've heard this one before, but Eddie Murphy's got a new album out, and it's not bad.

No, really. Stop laughing.

Sure, his last shot at this singing thing was embarrassingly tentative, and his big hit, "Party All the Time," was noteworthy mainly for its lyrical flaccidity, its production limpness and its vocal impotence. But *So Happy* is different.

Look, there is no punch line, okay, 'cause this isn't a joke. Now sit still and read the review.

On *So Happy*, Murphy becomes the singer he wanted to be last time out. His performance is 100 percent more assured, and he seems willing to trust his instincts to a greater degree than before. There's no reason for Luther Vandross to go ducking for cover, but Michael Jackson may want to consider it, especially since it's Mike's storehouse that Murphy raids with such impunity, coming away with a handful of those grunts, growls and squeals, not to mention feathery falsettos.

If Murphy is more of a musical mimic than an innovator, there's no great harm in that. Heck, Michael himself took those grunts and squeals from Mavis Staples anyway. But what Murphy does is use those elements to dazzling effect. He delivers fey Euro-rock in the title track, then sweeps into a raw sexual celebration like "Love Moans" or the sweetly simmering closer, "Tonight." He's at his best, though, when he blends his voice, a pumping chunk of rhythm, a little synthesizer razzmatazz and his own off-center sense of humor.

Murphy's loopy world-view — and his horse-laugh — are what set tracks like "Bubble Hill," "Till the Money's Gone" and "Put Your Mouth on Me" apart and give Eddie a musical persona that's completely unique. Think about it — how much humor is there in the black music mainstream?

I'm telling you, this new Eddie Murphy album's not bad at all. No, really; I'm serious. (Leonard Pitts Jr.)

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